JUNE BROWN

Before the Year Dot

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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June Brown

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Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine.

'Auguries of Innocence' by
William Blake, 1863

Oh, why should she who holds all my hopes of peace
Seek her peace with strangers
And increase the number of her failures?

Personal poem by
James Law Forsyth, 1948

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Prologue

At sixteen I was very interested in palmistry. The fate line on my right palm had a distinct break at the age of thirty. It broke into two parts that ran for a quarter of an inch on parallel tracks. I used to look at it and wonder, 'What will happen to me when I am thirty that will change my life?' Of course, it was Johnny's death. But, in fact, my life was changed twice by death.

I can't remember a time when Marise wasn't there (she was sixteen months older than me).

'Junie, Junie, quick, get the cotton wool and the olive oil.' My sister Micie (my name for her, pronounced Meecie) woke me early one morning in June 1934. I was seven years old.

She was sitting up beside me in the bed that we shared in the big attic of our flat over Father's electrical business. The first floor had two main rooms – a drawing room and a

dining room that seemed enormous to me. There was a kitchen, a bathroom and two bedrooms; one where my parents slept and the other where my father's canaries were kept in cages. They had had an aviary at our previous house in Warwick Road but the flat had no garden.

Micie and I were relegated to the attic, which, ironically considering Father's business, had no electric light and we had to go to bed by candlelight. I was scared whenever I was sent up into the darkness to fetch our nightdresses in order for us to be able to undress downstairs in the light.

The attic frightened me because there was a trap door set in the floor. It opened up to reveal a disused, back staircase, which would have led straight from the maid's attic bedroom to the kitchen, keeping her out of sight. We would wait in dread for this door to open, revealing some unknown terror.

I ran down the main staircase to the bathroom to fetch the olive oil and cotton wool – a panacea for earache. I did not think to wake my mother.

Micie was put into my parents' bed where Mother could care for her more easily. I wasn't aware that Micie was very ill. I can still see her sitting up in Mother's bed. I must have gone to say goodbye to her before I went to school. I have a memory of my granny going in to see her there and coming out saying, '*There* is a dying child', but, do I remember it or did Mother tell me long afterwards? I know I have a picture of it in my mind.

A few days later, I came home from school and Micie wasn't there. She had been taken to Ipswich General Hospital for a mastoid operation.

Rosebud (Rosemary, our younger sister) and I never saw her again.

My mother did tell me, much later, how dreadful it was to hear Micie cry out when the dressings packing the wound behind her ear were drawn out and then replaced. Whether an infection was introduced through this, I don't know, but Micie developed meningitis, became paralysed and, a few days later, she died. Had she lived, she would have been permanently paralysed and would have spent her childhood in one of those long, wicker spinal carriages. Yet, Mother, who was with her, said that, just before she died, she suddenly sat up in bed, held out her arms and smiled.

Micie was a very spiritual child. In the hospital, she had asked Mother to bring her Bible to her. In contrast, she was also a tomboy. I wasn't. I was timid.

I can't remember a time at all when Micie wasn't there. I can see myself at school outside the classroom door saying to my teacher, Miss Downing in a very ordinary, prosaic voice, 'Micie died yesterday.'

Her coffin lay in the darkened drawing room with the door closed. We never saw her, Rosebud and I. We just knew she was there.

On the day of the funeral, twelve-year-old Maggie Forsdyke had come to take care of us. She often used to come and play with us in the garden of our old house in Warwick Road and play our piano for us in the drawing room. Although she didn't know what the day was about, Rosebud, who was four, was aware of the atmosphere of misery and she started to cry. Rosebud didn't know why but she didn't want Maggie to play.

Micie was buried in the children's section of Ipswich Cemetery. She was buried in my brother John Peter's grave, who had died as a baby eighteen months before. She has a marble headstone, with angels on either side. Afterwards, we would walk to the cemetery to put flowers on the grave. In the winter, it was always chrysanthemums. I have never liked chrysanthemums since. Their smell reminds me. She and I had always shared a room, walked to school together and were hardly ever apart. Had she lived, we would have been in the same class at school, as I was to jump a class that summer, being clever as a child. Suddenly I was on my own. There was Rosebud, of course, but she was only four, and so was not much of a companion to me. She was a dear little girl but we were never as close as Micie and I had been.

Micie was born on the 6 October 1925, and died in June, 1934. Had antibiotics been available, there would have been no operation, she would not have died and, consequently, my life would have been quite different.

The loss of her affected my whole character and shaped the way I behaved for a long time. In particular, it influenced my expectations of men. Too dependent, I found it impossible to be happy alone. I was constantly in and out of love, always looking for the kind of caring that Micie had given me – the wholehearted acceptance of me just as I was. I kept looking for the friend I had lost.

I wanted to share everything as I had for the first seven years of my life. I found that companionship for a while, when I married my first husband Johnny. He was a great sharer and he did look after me and, in many ways, I looked after him.

I can be happy on my own now. I've learnt how to be.

Having written that I realise that I'm not being entirely truthful. After ten years of being a widow I would still like to share thoughts, laughter, meals, visits to the theatre, problems, house repairs! Not a husband nor a lover do I want. Just a compatible companion.

Chapter One

We moved very quickly after Marise's funeral to a semi-detached house in Grove Lane. Moving into this unfamiliar, gloomy house with its dark bare attics disorientated me further. It never seemed to feel or see the sun. Mother must have found the memory of Marise sitting up in her bed, seemingly not seriously ill and so soon afterwards lying in her coffin in the drawing room, too much to bear.

Micie's death hadn't drawn my parents closer either. Father was drinking heavily and there were many rows. Maybe that was partly caused by the accusation Grandma had flung at him the day that Micie died. Father arrived at Grandma's house, where we were staying, with the news of Micie's death. Grandma shouted at him, 'You killed that child.'

Apparently he had hit Micie round the head at some point

and, in Grandma's eyes, the blow to the head had caused the mastoid. Father rarely hit us. I remember him hitting me round the face only once when I had spilt a bottle of black ink on a white tablecloth; but that was some years later.

The Grove Lane house was the scene of constant arguments, which culminated one evening in an almighty row.

Rosebud and I cowered behind the sofa. Father seized the neck of Mother's black-and-white, semi-mourning dress – which belonged to her youngest sister, Auntie Marie – and the dress tore. Mother pulled on his tie in defence, almost throttling him.

Mother, Rosebud and I left Father the following day. That morning, once he had gone to his business and I had gone to school, Mother hired a van and removed our clothes and some of the furniture, taking them and Rosebud the short distance to her parents' house at 54 Spring Road. She met me from school that afternoon and took me back with her to Grandma's house.

Frightened of Father's reaction to this daylight flit, we promptly fled to Yarmouth, accompanied by Grandma.

The journey by steam train was an adventure for me. I had never been on one before. I remember holding my head out of the window to feel the wind rushing past and retreating with a smut in my eye.

It wasn't the most original hiding place. Ever since I could remember we had gone to Yarmouth for our week's summer holiday. But this time we were in constant apprehension that Father would follow. Everywhere we went, we would stop and peer round the street corners to make sure the coast was clear.

I have only one other memory of this time. We were hiding in a small, backstreet lodging house – quite different to our usual, respectable boarding house. Rosebud and I got up very early one morning to go down to the beach by ourselves where we thought the water would be much warmer if we walked into the path of the rising sun. Going to fetch our bathing costumes, which were in our private sitting room, we found our landlady, her husband and family using it as a bedroom. I remember them all suddenly sitting up as we opened the door. It was a very small house.

We went to the beach for our walk in the sea.

It was warmer.

Mother couldn't have known we couldn't swim, she wouldn't have let us go.

Towards the end of the week, Father appeared on the doorstep. I don't know how he found us he must have gone to Granny's house and asked where we were, dear grandfather, who would never lie, would have told him our hiding place!

Grandma opened the door to him. There was an altercation and Grandma, not in the least intimidated, knocked his pince-nez from his nose, which smashed into pieces. Nevertheless, when we returned to Spring Road the following day, we heard that Father had driven safely back to Ipswich without them.

Grandma's comment was, 'The Devil looks after his own!'